



C.Ss.R. SPIRITUALITY

ONE BODY (Eph 4,4)

UN SOLO CORPO (Ef 4,4)

UN SEUL CORPS (Eph 4,4)

UN SOLO CUERPO (Eph 4,4)

JEDNA WSPÓLNOTA (Ef 4,4)

UM SÓ CORPO (Ef 4,4)

EIN LEIB (Eph 4,4)

THE YEAR DEDICATED TO COMMUNITY LIFE

To Strengthen THE SENSE OF BELONGING¹

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.”² (Acts 4,32)

“We Redemptorists were born in the heart of an ardent disciple of Jesus, who was inflamed with zeal for the redemption of all, with special preference for the abandoned poor”³

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

Our missionary vocation calls us to insert ourselves into the history of our peoples and our cultures. This presents us with challenges that oblige us to live in a constant renewal, and in a continuous effort to contextualise and project ourselves into the future.

The future presents itself as a "*kairos*" which, on the one hand, leads us to "reinvent" ourselves and, on the other, asks us to return to the original and creative fidelity of our charism. This reality invites us, therefore, not to remain anchored in fixed patterns of the past, but to cultivate an attitude of openness that demands profound changes.

For us, as bearers of the mission of proclaiming the Good News of abundant redemption, faced daily with the challenge of building our Redemptorist identity, what does it mean to belong?

“Belonging means, first and foremost, being aware of one's own identity, which is constructed and defined on the basis of the self. The personal dimension of self-awareness, always present in a person's life, is prior to the social dimension of belonging, which develops in relation to the environment and the people who make up the community of reference.

Belonging also means feeling part of a group that shares common behaviours, ways of thinking and attitudes. In general, belonging arises from a process of identification, in which the sphere of the "I"

¹ This text was inspired by a reflection given by Javier Alvarez, Director General, to the Daughters of Charity at their General House in Paris on the occasion of their 2007 Renewal, (Acts 4:32).

² The biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

³ General Government, Communicanda 2 of 2006. *Redemption*, no. 15.

is identified with the "we", which allows us to recognise ourselves and to be recognised as members of a group, also through the assumption of certain distinctive signs. Belonging becomes conscious through reflection on one's own identity, one's own values and the values shared with the group to which one belongs. Awareness of one's own roots and of one's own history and culture creates the conditions for belonging, which also generates the possibility of recognising those who are different, of openness and confrontation with others."⁴

This is how we can understand why a sense of belonging was always one of St Alphonsus' major preoccupations. In November 1732, when he felt lonely, he vowed not to leave the Institute. He records this experience in this way:

*"Today, 28 November 1732, I have sworn not to leave the Institute unless I am ordered to do so by Falcoia or another Director or his successor."*⁵

What is the need to talk about a sense of belonging in our time? With the advent first of modernity and then of post-modernity, the human being has become increasingly important in his or her relationship with society and institutions. As a consequence, the person is more valued today in his or her subjectivity, more respected in his or her individuality and in his or her differences than was the case in earlier times. There is no doubt that this change has been very positive from a human and Christian point of view. We need only recall the biblical statement: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath". However, it is not easy to harmonise the institution and the individual in his subjectivity in a balanced way. This is why the theme of the sense of belonging to the Congregation can help us to maintain this difficult but desirable balance. To all this, we must add what some thinkers have pointed out about today's culture: it is individualistic, selective, syncretistic and weakly committed. These are just a few characteristics which, in some way, also affect our sense of belonging today because they lead to a partial adherence to the global project of the Congregation.

WHAT ARE THE VALUES THAT UNDERPIN THE SENSE OF BELONGING?

We can speak of belonging in terms of identification with the Congregation and the project that God has entrusted to it. If identification can be expressed to a greater or lesser degree, this means that belonging allows for different degrees. It must be said that the sense of belonging is not an independent value, but is related to many other values. We can say that the presence or deficiency of the sense of belonging is the consequence of a whole way of life: those who have cultivated the particular dimensions of their life will have a sense of belonging, those who neglect them will not... If we were to try to visualise this last idea, we could consider the relationship between a house and its foundations: the house is the sense of belonging, and this house will not be able to stand without solid foundations. Belonging is based on the fundamental values of our spirit. Let us look at some of those which, when lived and worked properly, ensure a clear sense of belonging.

1. The value of our vocation and our call

⁴ Cfr. http://www.giangukai.org/new/portughese/appart_gol.asp.

⁵ CHIOVARO, Francesco. Santo Afonso. Aparecida. Editora Santuário. 1996. págs 88-89

In his infinite love years ago, God called us to be part of the Congregation. He placed us in the best of ways: to "continue the example of Jesus Christ the Saviour by preaching the Word of God to the poor, as he said of himself: He sent me to evangelise the poor". He chose us to continue the life and mission of his Son. He has made us Redemptorists. These events that have taken place in our lives have necessarily marked us in a profound way. It is not possible to receive and live them in a superficial way. Remembering these events and their impact on our lives helps us to see how our sense of belonging has been formed. Therefore, the vocational experience and the sense of belonging are related and continue to be expressed clearly in daily life.

From vocation to con-vocation. It is important to relive the theological experience of having been called, summoned and sent by the Redeemer. Mk 3,13-15 presents us with the itinerary of a complete vocational experience. For us, it is important that this experience goes beyond the psychological and social levels and becomes a theological experience, that is, an experience of personal relationship with God and his Kingdom. Of course, this path must be closely linked to prayer and a clear awareness of our calling. As for the experience that takes place on this theological level, I cannot help but think of those who live with me and those who are part of the Congregation; that is, the people called by God, and who have been called to work, together with me, in the concrete task of caring for the privileged of the Kingdom of God.

This theological experience contains an energy strong enough to guarantee love and respect for my confreres. Moreover, this experience is called to be translated into a current of fraternity that flows through the whole institutional body and transcends the barriers of time and space. Indeed, many others were called before us, and they have already gone to the Father's house and are also part of this Congregation. To them we owe our appreciation, our recognition and our prayers, as we would to any family member. The experience of the call is closely related to the experience of belonging to the body of which I am a part and which, at the same time, transcends me. Therefore, highlighting the value of vocation, which among many other aspects includes community life, helps to strengthen a sense of belonging that goes beyond death, as our Statute 036 expresses so well: "*The charity of the Redemptorists must include deceased confreres...*" In this sense, it is good to remember the deceased confreres of the (V) Province and to commend ourselves to their intercession. Praying for them strengthens the sense of family. For one thing is certain: there are many confreres who are saints, even if the Church has never canonised them. The (V) Province and the communities should invoke the deceased confreres because they are part of the victorious Congregation that wears the crown of glory of which St. Alphonsus spoke.

2. The Congregation as a value born of God's will.

Father Tannoia, his first biographer, writes that St. Alphonsus, on November 2, 1732, "*certain of God's will, made a courageous and resolute decision. Making a total sacrifice of the city of Naples to Jesus Christ, he offered to live the rest of his days among the sheepfolds and huts and to die among the shepherds and peasants.*" And Tannoia, his chronicler, adds emphatically: "*The year 1732 was chosen by God for the happy birth of our Congregation. Pope Clement XII was at the head of the Vatican and Charles Augustus VI was ruling the empire of the Kingdom of Naples. Alphonsus Liguori, blessed by Fathers Fiorillo and Pagano, mounted the poor horse; unbeknownst to his parents and*

his dearest friends, he left Naples on the back of a donkey and took the road to Scala.”⁶

If we look at our own lives, we will feel called to recognise with gratitude the moments and places where the Lord has manifested himself and where we have learned to know him and to follow him. The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer founded by St. Alphonsus Liguori, this articulated group of men and structures which, from its foundation to the present day, has sought to be an instrument at the service of the Kingdom of God, has been for us that privileged place.

We can affirm that in the Congregation we have found the Kingdom of God, the "hidden treasure", the "pearl of great price". How can we not love and feel part of this "body" which is "mediation" for us? I am happy to hear confreres express their gratitude to the Congregation, recognising how much - and everything - they have received from it. Of course, the essential thing is God and his Kingdom; everything else, even the Church and the Congregation itself, are but mediations of this Kingdom. But we also recognise that the Kingdom of God and a concrete mediation of this Kingdom, such as the Congregation, are so closely linked that we feel totally immersed in the same reality. Hence the firm decision we took one day to belong to it for life. Mediation will always be a mediation, it is not an absolute, but we can consider it as a place of grace, not abstract, but something very concrete.

Moreover, the Congregation is not only a meeting place that ends up creating our identity and belonging. Since its foundation, the Congregation has received a mission from God; a mission which has continued in history through time and space, and which is unfolding here and now. It is the Congregation that receives and transmits this mission to the various communities and confreres. The mission is one, even if the ways of living it are different. The mission gives the Redemptorists a particular identity and also forms their sense of belonging. Obviously, the common horizon of "continuing the example of Jesus Christ the Redeemer by preaching the Word of God to the poor..." gives the Redemptorists an awareness, a sensitivity, a style and common characteristics which do not exist in other institutions dedicated to the work of evangelisation.

WHAT ARE THE FRUITS OF THIS SENSE OF BELONGING?

The sense of belonging can be symbolised as a tree with its roots and its fruits. So far, we have only talked about the roots that support our sense of belonging to the Congregation.

Let us now consider the fruits that are produced when there is a healthy sense of belonging that is continually nourished.

1. Unity in Mission.

Let us make a preliminary clarification. When we speak of the mission of the Congregation, we refer to its purpose, which is none other than: "to follow the example of Jesus Christ the Saviour in preaching the Word of God to the poor, as He said of Himself: He sent me to preach the good news to the poor" with special preference for situations of pastoral urgency and for the most abandoned (cf. Const. 1). This is the reason for the existence of the Congregation in the Church and is the distinctive

⁶ SÉGALEN, Jean-Marie, *Praying 15 days with St Alphonsus*. Aparecida. SP. Editora Santuário, 1996, pp. 65-66

sign of its fidelity to the vocation it has received.” In our understanding of "mission", it includes all forms of service and none in particular.

When there is an awareness of a sense of belonging to the Congregation, and when this awareness is nourished by basic values such as those presented above, the people who make up a Community or (V) Province discover themselves to be in ongoing mission. This is an element that binds the community and/or (v) province together. There is a logic of mutual enrichment between mission and community: the mission creates the community and the community gives strength to carry out the mission.

The text of the Acts of the Apostles quoted in the subtitle of this essay allows us to contemplate the apostolic vitality of the disciples of Jesus; the reason for the apostolic zeal of this first Community is explained by the fact that: “*The multitude of the faithful were of one heart and soul*” (Acts 4,32). The explanation for this union of minds and feelings is not to be sought in the affinity of characters, of ages or in a common formation, but in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the "driving force", the "foundation" and, in Redemptorist language, the "centre [...]" (cf. Const. 23) of this community. For Jesus Christ was in the minds and hearts of all his disciples. For this reason, the text states that “*they were of one heart and soul.*”

We know that unity in mission is realised through plurality of tasks. In mission, the evangelisation needs of the poor are multiple and varied, and therefore the responses through evangelisation services must necessarily be multiform. A sense of belonging helps us to situate ourselves correctly and in balance in the unity and plurality of mission.

2. Union of hearts

This is another dimension of community. It is the relationship between the sense of belonging to the Congregation and fraternal love. Those who have a deep sense of family express this love to their parents and to each of their brothers and sisters. The same will be true of “The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (C.Ss.R) [which] brings together priests, deacons and lay members who, in fraternal communion, contribute to the fulfilment of the common mission, both inside and outside the house... and seek to become a leaven of the Gospel for the world [...]⁷”

There can be no doubt that the Community is for the mission. We could cite many documents to support this affirmation. It is in the community that the Redemptorist missionary will find the strength to exercise his apostolic ministry.

The question is: where does the strength of the community come from? It comes from several sources: one of them is the spiritual life. No one can doubt that the community is a privileged place where the Holy Spirit is at work?

Let us dwell for a moment on the human and fraternal dimension. It is enough for each confrere to show an open, optimistic and joyful character for a potential of positive energies to be

⁷ EG 01

established in the community, capable of stimulating all the confreres to live their consecrated life with joy. This potential of energies, in turn, invigorates the physical and spiritual strength of those who are tired because of age or missionary work, according to Constitutions 22 and 55. If, on the other hand, a climate of suspicion, mistrust and rivalry reigns, the community atmosphere will unfortunately become intolerable and no one will be able to receive the necessary support (cf. Gal 5, 19 - 21).

Investing in the creation of communities where human relationships have a real quality of life is necessary from the point of view of the Redemptorist mission, because a happy community fulfils a good apostolic service and, at the same time, ensures the well-being of its members. When there is understanding and unity of heart, the community easily becomes a point of reference for the confrere. It is common to hear many confreres recalling good moments in the communities they have been in (there are many more positive than negative ones). Beware of prophets of doom, as Paul VI said). These communities have become for them points of reference in their following of Jesus Christ (cf. Gal 5, 22 - 23).

On the other hand, if the community does not cultivate feelings of esteem, affection and care for the other, it will cease to be a point of reference and will be replaced by other things, thus losing the sense of belonging.

Union of hearts applies to the concrete space of the local community, but it must also extend to the (v) province and the congregation as a whole. The sense of belonging makes this fraternal love possible, which in turn strengthens belonging.

We need to love the Congregation. It is our Mother. In her we live our faith; we respond to God's call and we are sent on mission. She forms us and nourishes us. To criticise her is a sign of a lack of esteem or a weak sense of belonging.

It will be very positive that in our community meetings, regional meetings and (V) Provincial Assemblies we critically analyse how we are living out our fidelity to our charism and how we are serving the Church in our missionary commitment.

Creatively and boldly reviewing our pastoral activities and apostolic works in the light of the fundamental criteria of our charism is a great service we can offer ourselves. Let us not lose sight of what characterises Redemptorists: *“of strong faith, of joyful hope, of ardent charity and burning zeal. They are “docile to the Holy Spirit who continually works to conform them to Christ, they learn to have the same sentiments as Christ (cf. Phil 2:5ff) and they are clothed with the same mentality (1 Cor 2:16) which nourishes them interiorly for the work of the apostolate through the variety of ministries [...] (cf. Const. 25). “They are always open to new inspirations of the Holy Spirit who always sets them on the way to serve with apostolic daring the human groups most in need of spiritual help, and to care in a special way for the poor, the weakest and most oppressed, whose evangelisation is a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk 4:18) and with whom Christ himself wished to identify himself.” (cf. Mt 25:40) (cf. Const. 4).*

CONCLUSION

Proclaiming the Gospel to the poor strengthens the sense of belonging to the Congregation. This is our great challenge: to be faithful to our principal addressees, for as St. Alphonsus said in his letter of 29 July 1774: *“I am sure that Jesus Christ looks upon our little Congregation with very loving eyes. And experience teaches us that, in spite of so many persecutions, He never ceases to help us to promote more and more his glory in so many places, multiplying also his graces”. Let us never cease to entrust ourselves to the divine Mother, since the Lord grants us the honour and pleasure of proclaiming His glories everywhere: this consoles me very much and gives me the confidence that this good Mother will not cease to care for each one of us and to obtain for us the grace to become saints.*

I bless you all, and each one in particular, in the name of the Most Holy Trinity; and I pray Jesus Christ, by his merits, to make all those who live and will live in the Congregation grow in his divine love, so that all of us, inflamed in heaven like seraphim, may eternally praise God and sing of his mercies.”

FOR COMMUNITY REFLECTION

1. What does it mean in concrete terms to belong to the C.Ss.R?
2. Why is there a need in our time to reflect on the meaning of belonging to the C.Ss.R?
3. What can I do concretely to strengthen my sense of belonging to the C.Ss.R?
4. Do I really believe that the Congregation is a work willed by God?

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NB: The original text is in Portuguese and translated into English.



ONE BODY is a text of prayer proposed by the Center for Redemptorist Spirituality. For more information: Fr. Piotr Chyla CSsR (Director of the Center for Spirituality - fr.chyla@gmail.com).